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The relationship between priestly motivational styles and personal wellbeing in ministry:

Exploring the connection between religious orientation and purpose in life

among Catholic priests serving in Italy

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**Abstract**

This study examines the association between priestly motivation (accessed via the psychological notion of religious orientation) and personal wellbeing (accessed via the psychological notion of purpose in life) among a sample of 155 Catholic priests serving in Italy. The data confirm a positive association between intrinsic religious orientation and purpose in life, but a negative association between quest religious orientation and purpose in life. These findings are discussed in light of the expectations placed on Catholic priests by the Church and by society.

*Key words:* psychology, religion, clergy, purpose in life, religious orientation

## **Introduction**

Constructs originated within the psychology of religion may also prove to be fruitful within the fields of empirical theology and pastoral sciences. Within this context the present study begins by exploring the utility of religious orientation theory and religious orientation measures (shaped within the psychology of religion) for illuminating individual differences in priestly motivation, a problem of central concern for empirical theology and pastoral science.

### **Religious orientation**

Religious orientation theory has its origins in the pioneering work of Allport and Ross (1967) as subsequently developed and expanded by Batson and Ventis (1982). At heart religious orientation theory is concerned with identifying the motivation underpinning the engagement of those who are religiously involved. Allport and Ross' (1967) original work distinguished between two contrasting sources of religious motivation which they characterised as intrinsic orientation and extrinsic orientation.

The extended definitions of extrinsic religiosity and intrinsic religiosity advanced by Allport and Ross (1967) are worth citing in full. Here is their description of the extrinsic orientation.

Persons with this orientation are disposed to use religion for their own ends. The term is borrowed from axiology, to designate an interest that is held because it serves other, more ultimate interests. Extrinsic values are always instrumental and utilitarian.

Persons with this orientation may find religion useful in a variety of ways - to provide security and solace, sociability and distraction, status and self-justification. The embraced creed is lightly held or else selectively shaped to fit more primary needs. In theological terms the extrinsic type turns to God, but without turning away from self.

(Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 434)

Here is their description of the intrinsic orientation.

Persons of this orientation find their master motive in religion. Other needs, strong as they may be, are regarded as of less ultimate significance, and they are, so far as possible, brought into harmony with the religious beliefs and prescriptions. Having embraced a creed the individual endeavours to internalise it and follow it fully. It is in this sense that he *lives* his religion. (Allport & Ross, 1967, p. 434)

Allport and Ross' (1967) intention in offering these definitions was not purely to be descriptive, but also to be evaluative. According to their model, the intrinsic religious orientation profiled a more mature approach to religion than the extrinsic religious orientation. This theoretical perspective was validated by early empirical studies that found intrinsic religious orientation to be correlated with positive psychological correlates, like socially inclusive values, while extrinsic religious orientation was found to be correlated with negative psychological correlates, like radical prejudice (for reviews see Batson & Ventis, 1982).

In their contribution to the debate, Batson and Ventis (1982) questioned whether intrinsic religious orientation really captured the essence of mature religion. According to their understanding, mature religion may be more adequately reflected in what they came to call quest religious orientation. Their definition of quest religious orientation is also worth citing at length.

An individual who approaches religion in this way recognises that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters. But still the questions are deemed important, and however tentative and subject to change, answers are sought. There may not be a clear belief in a transcendent reality, but there is a transcendent, religious dimension to the individual's life. (Batson & Ventis, 1982, p. 150)

Allport and Ross (1967) proposed two scales to measure their two religious orientations: a nine-item scale to assess the intrinsic orientation and an eleven-item scale to assess the extrinsic orientation. Batson and Ventis (1982) proposed a six-item scale to assess the quest orientation, which was subsequently developed and expanded to a twelve-item scale by Batson and Schoenrade (1991a, 1991b). More recently, Francis (2007) proposed the New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO) which offered three nine-item measures of intrinsic orientation, extrinsic orientation and quest orientation, each of which displayed good properties of construct validity of internal consistency reliability.

Both the conceptualisation and the operationalisation of these three components of religious orientation theory (intrinsic orientation, extrinsic orientation, and quest orientation) have been the subject of considerable critique, scrutiny and controversy. The flavour of these debates were well captured by Kirkpatrick and Hood (1990) in their review of religious orientation theory, as ‘the boon or bane of contemporary psychology of religion.’ The debates have been more recently organised and evaluated by Francis (2007) in the foundation paper proposing and testing the New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO).

### **Connecting motivational styles with personal wellbeing**

Translated into the field of individual differences in priestly motivation, these three established models of religious orientation might helpfully characterise three different approaches to understanding and expressing priesthood. The intrinsic religious orientation captures the vision of internal piety and obedience to the inherited tradition. The extrinsic religious orientation captures more the externality of the office of priest. The quest religious orientation captures a faith inspired by asking religious questions and the willingness to press the boundaries of that tradition.

These three distinctive priestly motivational styles captured by the measures of intrinsic religious orientation, extrinsic religious orientation, and quest religious orientation

may be received somewhat differently within different ecclesiastical contexts. The intrinsically motivated priest may feel especially comfortable and supported within ecclesial contexts that nurture and reward internal piety and obedience to the inherited tradition. The extrinsically motivated priest may feel especially comfortable and supported within ecclesial contexts that nurture and reward the secular and social correlates of congregationally-focused ministry. The quest motivated priest may feel especially comfortable and supported within ecclesial contexts that nurture and reward an open and questioning approach to Christian faith and to Church order. Against this background, it is not unreasonable to hypothesise that it may be those priests whose motivational style most closely reflects the ecclesial environment in which they operate who experience higher levels of personal wellbeing in ministry.

Within the broader field of positive psychology there are numerous constructs that reflect and measure distinctive aspects of personal wellbeing. The notion of purpose in life occupies a particularly interesting position within this range of constructs, since purpose in life may be of particular relevance for engagement between positive psychology on the one hand and empirical theology and pastoral sciences on the other hand. From a psychological perspective, following the pioneering work of Frankl (1978), purpose in life is understood to be central to the meaning-making process which confers meaningfulness. It is purpose in life that makes living worthwhile and prevents despair from leading to suicide. From a theological perspective, following the pioneering work of Tillich (1952), purpose in life is understood to be central to the very essence of religion. Substantive analyses of religion point to the beliefs, teaching and rituals that explicitly address the fundamental questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life.

Empirical studies concerned with measuring purpose in life are able to draw on several established research traditions. The best known and most used instrument, drawing directly on Frankl's (1978) work, is the Purpose in Life Test proposed by Crumbaugh (1968)

and Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969). More recently Robbins and Francis (2000) proposed the Purpose in Life Scale. There are also single-item measures of purpose in life, as proposed by Francis and Evans (1996).

### **Connecting religious orientation with purpose in life**

There is already a well-established research tradition exploring the connection between religious orientation and purpose in life, including studies: among 71 students by Crandall and Rasmussen (1975); among 52 students by Bolt (1975); among 427 students by Soderstrom and Wright (1977); among 84 students and 177 adults by Paloutzian, Jackson, and Crandall (1978); among 11 Protestant ministers and 38 parishioners by Weinstein and Cleanthous (1996); among 103 older adults by Ardel (2003); among 130 adults by Janssen, Bänziger, Dezutter, and Hutesbaut (2005); among 472 adults by Dezutter, Soenens, and Hutesbaut (2006); among 161 undergraduate students by Byrd, Hagemen, and Isle (2007); among 133 university students by Hui and Fung (2009); among 407 older Methodists by Francis, Jewell, and Robbins (2010); and among 197 parents and relatives of psychology students by Blazek and Besta (2012). All of these 12 studies included recognised measures of intrinsic religiosity; nine of them included recognised measures of extrinsic religiosity, but three did not (Soderstrom & Wright, 1977; Weinstein & Cleanthaus, 1996; Byrd, Hagemen, & Isle, 2007); only two included recognised measures of quest religiosity (Francis, Jewell, & Robbins, 2010; Blazek & Besta, 2012).

The data from these studies provide a coherent and pretty consistent picture of the connection between religious orientation and purpose in life. Eleven of the 12 studies reporting on intrinsic religiosity demonstrate a significant positive correlation between intrinsic religiosity, and purpose in life. The study by Crandall and Rasmussen (1975) that shows a significant negative correlation between intrinsic religiosity and purpose in life is puzzling and suggests that this dataset might be worth reanalysing. The consensus of the



other eleven studies suggests that individuals who find their primary motive in religion also find that their religion leads to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life. All nine studies reporting on extrinsic religiosity find no significant correlations, either negative or positive, between extrinsic religiosity and purpose in life. The consensus of these nine studies suggests that individuals who use their religion for other ends do not find that their religion leads to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life. The two studies reporting on quest religiosity find no significant correlation, either negative or positive between quest religiosity and purpose in life. The consensus of these two studies suggests that quest religiosity, like extrinsic religiosity, fails to realise the greater sense of purpose in life associated with intrinsic religiosity. These findings shaped by religious orientation theory suggest that religious motivation plays a significant part in shaping the connection between religious and personal wellbeing.

### **Research question**

Against this background the aim of the present study is to test the association between priestly motivational styles (conceptualised and measured in terms of religious orientation theory) and personal wellbeing (conceptualised and measured in terms of purpose in life theory) among a sample of Catholic priests serving in Italy. Three specific hypotheses are being tested by this study.

The first hypothesis posits a significant positive association between intrinsic religious orientation and purpose in life. This hypothesis is shaped by the consensus of previous research and by the assumption that the Catholic Church nurtures and supports an intrinsic approach to faith.

The second hypothesis posits a significant negative association between quest religious orientation and purpose in life. This hypothesis contradicts the consensus of

previous research but is shaped by the assumption that the Catholic Church discourages a quest approach to the Christian faith and to Church order.

The third hypothesis posits no significant connection between extrinsic religious orientation and purpose in life. This hypothesis is shaped by the consensus of previous research and by the assumption that the Catholic Church neither nurtures nor discourages an extrinsic approach to faith.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

In the context of programmes operated in Rome for Catholic priests on the topic of personality and spirituality, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire covering issues relevant to the programme. Participation in the programme was voluntary and responses to the questionnaire were confidential and anonymous. Full data were provided by 155 priests.

### **Sample**

Three-fifths of the participants were Italians (63%) and the remaining 37% were from a number of other countries; 56% were diocesan priests, and 44% were religious order priests. Participants' age ranged from 24 to 76 years with an average age of 46 years ( $SD = 12.16$ ); 8% of the participants were in their twenties, 29% in their thirties, 30% in their forties, 21% in their fifties, 6% in their sixties, and 7% in their seventies.

### **Measures**

*Religious orientation* was assessed by the New Indices of Religious Orientation developed by Francis (2007). This instrument proposes three nine-item measures of intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, and quest religiosity. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly.

*Purpose in life* was assessed by two instruments. The Purpose in Life Scale, developed by Robbins and Francis (2000) proposes a twelve-item scale to assess a unidimensional construct. For example, a core item reads, 'My personal existence is full of purpose'. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly. The Purpose in Life Test, developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969), proposes a 20-item scale. Each item is rated on a seven-point semantic differential type scale for which the poles are defined by opposing constructs. For example, the first item offers the stem 'I am usually', rated by the opposing poles of 'completely bored', and 'exuberant, enthusiastic'.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analysed by the SPSS statistical package, using the frequencies, reliability, Pearson correlation, and partial correlation routines.

### **Results**

The first step in data analysis concerns an examination of the scale properties of the three indices of religious orientation (intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, and quest religiosity) and the two indices of personal wellbeing (the Purpose in Life Test, and the Purpose in Life Scale). The data presented in Table 1 demonstrate that both measures of purpose in life achieved good levels of internal consistency reliability, while the three measures of religious orientations passed the threshold of acceptability of .65 proposed by DeVellis (2003).

- insert Table 1 about here -

The second step in data analysis concerns an examination of the bivariate correlations between the three measures of religious orientation, the two measures of purpose in life, and age. The data presented in Table 2 demonstrate that there is a significant positive correlation between age and intrinsic religiosity, suggesting that intrinsic religiosity may develop and

strengthen with age, but that none of the other variables are significantly correlated with age. In light of the correlation between intrinsic religiosity and age, table 3 takes the analysis one step further by examining the partial correlations between the variables controlling for age.

- insert Table 2 about here -

On the basis of Table 3 the three research questions posed by the present study can be addressed. First, there are significant positive correlations between intrinsic religiosity and both the Purpose in Life Test and the Purpose in Life Scale. Second, there are significant negative correlations between quest religiosity and both the Purpose in Life Test and the Purpose in Life Scale. Third, the findings are less straightforward in terms of extrinsic religiosity: there is no significant correlation between extrinsic religiosity and the Purpose in Life Scale, but there is a significant negative correlation between extrinsic religiosity and the Purpose in Life Test. The correlation of .64 between the Purpose in Life Test and the Purpose in Life Scale indicates that these two measures are accessing similar but far from identical constructs.

- insert Table 3 about here -

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This study was designed to examine the association between priestly motivation (accessed via the psychological notion of religious orientation) and personal wellbeing (accessed via the psychological notion of purpose in life) among a sample of 155 Catholic priests serving in Italy. In the light of religious orientation theory three hypotheses were advanced regarding ways in which the three distinctive priestly motivational styles captured by the measures of intrinsic religious orientation, extrinsic religious orientation, and quest religious orientation may be received somewhat differently within the ecclesial context of the contemporary Catholic Church and may consequently be reflected in different qualities of personal wellbeing among priests.

The first hypothesis posited a significant positive association between intrinsic religious orientation and purpose in life among Catholic priests in Italy. This hypothesis was shaped both by the consensus of previous research and by the assumption that the contemporary Catholic Church nurtures and supports an intrinsic approach to faith. This hypothesis was supported in respect to both the Purpose in Life Test and the Purpose in Life Scale. The conclusion may be drawn that the intrinsically motivated priest in the contemporary Catholic Church in Italy can flourish in the sense of enjoying a higher level of personal wellbeing.

The second hypothesis posited a significant negative association between quest religious orientation and purpose in life among Catholic priests serving in Italy. This hypothesis was shaped by the assumption that the contemporary Catholic Church discourages a quest approach to the Christian faith and to Church order. This hypothesis was supported in respect to both the Purpose in Life Test and the Purpose in Life Scale. This finding is significantly poignant in that it is inconsistent with the findings from the other two studies that reported on quest religious orientation and purpose in life among other populations (older Methodists and parents and relatives of psychology students). The conclusion may be drawn that the quest motivated priest in the contemporary Catholic Church in Italy does not flourish so well in the sense of experiencing a lower level of personal wellbeing.

The third hypothesis posited no significant association between extrinsic religious orientation and purpose in life. This hypothesis was shaped by the consensus of previous research and by the assumption that the Catholic Church neither nurtures nor discourages an extrinsic approach to faith. This hypothesis was supported in respect to the Purpose in Life Scale, but not in respect of the Purpose in Life Test that reported a significant negative correlation with extrinsic religious orientation. Further research is needed to explore further

the ways in which these two measures of purpose in life access somewhat different constructs.

The findings from the present study have suggested a connection between priestly motivational styles and personal wellbeing in ministry among Catholic priests serving in Italy. In this context intrinsic motivation was associated with better levels of personal wellbeing and quest religious motivation was associated with worse levels of personal wellbeing. The weakness with the study is that the data were derived from an opportunity sample of priests engaging with programmes on personality and spirituality. Further research is needed to replicate the present study in Italy by means of a random sample survey. Further research is also now needed in a very different ecclesial context in which a quest orientation may be more positively encouraged, for example parts of the Anglican Church in England or parts of the Presbyterian Church in the USA in order to examine whether or not the connection between priestly motivation styles and personal wellbeing may in fact be influenced by the specific ecclesial context.

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Table 1

*Scale properties*

<i>scale</i>	N items	Alpha	Mean	SD
Intrinsic orientation	9	.66	35.4	4.6
Extrinsic orientation	9	.73	25.9	5.6
Quest orientation	9	.68	29.0	4.9
Purpose in Life Scale	12	.89	52.7	5.6
Purpose in Life Test	20	.89	109.8	14.9

Table 2

*Correlation matrix*

	Age	QUES	INTR	EXTR	PILS
Purpose in Life Test (PILT)	.07	-.28***	.29***	-.23**	.63***
Purpose in Life Scale (PILS)	-.01	-.19*	.38***	-.11	
Extrinsic Orientation (EXTR)	.11	.18*	.41***		
Intrinsic Orientation (INTR)	.21**	-.15			
Quest Orientation (QUES)	-.12				

Table 3

*Partial correlation matrix*

	PILT	QUES	INTR	EXTR
Purpose in Life Scale (PILS)	.64***	-.20*	.39***	-.11
Extrinsic Orientation (EXTR)	-.24**	.20*	.40***	
Intrinsic Orientation (INTR)	.29***	-.12		
Quest Orientation (QUES)	-.27***			